



NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Studying a Cross-Cultural Community in a Post-Conflict Society

A Marketplace as the Setting

ABELLIA ANGGI WARDANI
Ph.D. Candidate in Culture Studies
Tilburg University

Abstract

This "notes from the field" depicts alternative approaches to study a cross-cultural community and is based on hands-on experiences during 10-month fieldwork in Ambon City, Maluku Province, Indonesia. This piece tries to explore different possible roles for an ethnographer to take on, to grasp the dynamics of an ethnically and religiously diverse community, namely at Mardika market, a traditional marketplace in post-conflict Ambon.

“Wasn’t it the first house that was burned during the conflicts?” said the motorcycle-taxi driver as he dropped me in front of my boarding house. I smiled, not knowing how to react to this and not sure whether or not I should follow up on his statement. For a split of a second, there was an awkward silence between us; then he turned away his motorcycle heading to the main street. I remember it happened during the first weeks of my fieldwork, that I envisaged lasting for four months long yet ended up as 8-month stay in the city where communal conflicts once broke out and forced their residents to live in religiously-fractured villages within Ambon City. I

headed to my room with thought, full of questions: When did it happen? During the night? Did the family manage to escape from the house? Or were they burned alive? Who did it? Why? And once again, why?”

As I revisited my first-month field notes, I came to understand that my confusion to the situation in Ambon was merely because I was not mentally ready to research a post-conflict society. I thought I was reasonably well-prepared, professionally and mentally, to conduct research there as I have worked for a peacebuilding project for two years in Ambon, before doing my dissertation research. Although I am aware that severe conflicts once



Fish sellers at Arumbae market

Image: A. A. Wardani

happened in this area and that, in some parts of the city, people are still living in an uneasy social-religious environment, I realised that I am not *well* aware of it. I barely know anything about how *severe* the conflicts were except the general statistical figures of the number of dead victims, displaced people and internally displaced people. Primarily I had theoretically understood the public debate on the *on-going uneasy* relation within Ambonese society, but had no realization or practical knowledge on how it was rooted in most of the everyday activities, that as most of the

literature on Ambon depict that the perpetrators of the conflicts were ordinary people whom you'd probably have crossed paths with. They could be your *former* neighbours, your *old* friends, etc.

My research aims to analyse the dynamics of the traditional marketplace, particularly the case of Mardika market, in fostering reconciliation in the aftermath of conflicts, let alone serving as a meeting point of diverse community members in Ambonese society. In doing so, I focus my fieldwork on mapping out the roles of the marketplace through chronological order:

before the communal conflicts, during the disputes, transformation periods and in the so-called contemporary post-conflict scenario.

Before I describe further about the actors at the Mardika market, let me start with a brief description of the research setting. The marketplace is home to at least 2,700 traders and is integrated with mini-bus terminal, commonly known as *angkot*, located in Sirimau sub-district. The Mardika market area hosts Muslim traders as the majority, both native Ambonese and migrant traders from outside islands, whereas the Mardika village is statistically predominantly inhabited by Christians.

This piece showcases three possible roles in doing observation when dealing with large, dense, complex, and dynamic research setting taking the case of a traditional marketplace.

As I recall, my third and fourth month in the field have been more productive compared to the first two months. Although, honestly, I am still struggling to define what productivity in ethnographic research is while all I did was sitting down at one corner of the market and watching people do what they do. I guess I was still wrestling with the very idea of doing ethnographic research at this point, but it got better. It would get better, hopefully, as of now, I have learned a significant amount of knowledge about the market and its actors and better understandings on the situation in Ambon prior, during, and after the communal conflicts broke out. As my take, I have gradually become more confident with the subject I

am dealing with, set aside all the unexpected and unintended setbacks during fieldwork which I believe that most ethnographers might as well had to face.

To capture the dynamics of the market, during observation, I changed roles from a) full observer, b) market actor, and c) participant observer. Being an observer means that I went to the market and walked through every alley and observed the selling and buying scenes as a third-person outsider. This role helped me when doing the mapping out and getting the general ideas about the research setting. It took me almost four months to get familiar with most of the alleys of the market.

Second, as a market actor, I would refer to when I went to the Mardika market for shopping as a (real) buyer to fulfil my daily needs. I did this purposively to get more sense of the logic of the buyers at Mardika market. In doing so, I came to the market from various entry points, bought different kinds of commodities and tried to get out of the market from different sides of the market each time and taking different modes of transportation (motorcycle taxi, minibus, pedicab, or walked back to my place).

Third, as a participant observer, I usually helped sellers to sell their goods and allowed other people to recognise me as an outsider. Nevertheless, other sellers mostly realised that I was an outsider, and sometimes buyers also noticed that I was not the real seller at Mardika Market. It can merely be explained by my physical traits of having lighter skin than what Ambonese people usually have. In addition to that,



Main street of the Mardika Market
(integrated with the Mardika minibus terminal)

Image: A. A. Wardani

having Javanese (Malay) face contour is quite distinguishable in broad daylight at the market. The decision to let people recognise me researching the market was to follow the idea of ethnographer as 'a fly on the wall'. I believe it worked two ways, by doing the selling and fully participating in the respondent's activity, I experienced the challenge of the sellers at the market, and it helped me to reach the 'going native' phase of my fieldwork. On the other hand, for the people surrounding the trade stall, as they became familiar with my presence, they did

not feel weird being observed by me anymore, at least lessened their uncomfortable feeling by the presence of a stranger in their daily sights.

These three roles allowed me to reflect on the various perspectives to analyse the dynamics of the Mardika market. I saw marketplace functions as economic income generation for traders and other market actors, as well as a place to fulfil daily needs for the buyers. On the other hand, it serves as a meeting point for people with various backgrounds, con-



Female buyers and traditional seller (*papalele*)
in one of the corner of the Mardika market
Image: A. A. Wardani

sciously or not; such contact did improve social interaction within segregated communities. Marketplace arguably played a role as information ground during the conflict period.

Meanwhile, when taking the role as an active buyer, I could see that the physical condition and arrangement of the market contribute to user's behaviours. Mardika market as a wet market is known for its dirty state especially during and after the rain, the existing potholes create puddles, and one needs to walk while avoiding: the holes, the cars, the other buyers, the moving sellers, etc. It somehow felt that you are on

a Mario Bros video game that you have to navigate yourselves to overcome and avoid obstacles ahead of you. In short, it is always a very chaotic situation. Choosing which sellers to buy produces is more of a random act, leaving aside any identifying marks or commonly established relationship with the traders.

As a participant observer, I tried to define the interaction between seller and buyer, among sellers coming from a similar ethno-religious background, among sellers from a different ethno-religious background, seller and other market actors.

In short, I saw that the unpredictable situation at the market contributes to what is called "Random Walk Theory," but in a more physical sense. Chaos at the marketplace urges buyers to take a random and unpredictable path in choosing and buying the offered merchandises. Their past purchase path or experience at the market does not necessarily inform their current and future choice of sellers at the market, but sometimes it does. They might get off from the minibus at a different point of the market every single time they went to the market. They might get on to the minibus at a different end of the market too. The order of the goods they would buy also differ every given time. The weight of their grocery also influences their economic

behaviour. In some cases, if the buyers have favourite sellers at the market where they usually purchase goods from, they might make extra efforts to come to those sellers to get a better deal. But it often happens only when the buyers will buy in large quantities for a party or special events. This way, it undermines the assumption that people would consider ethnic and religious background when they do the economic transaction at the market. By taking up three different roles to observe the Mardika marketplace, I found a more encompassing perspective on how the marketplace functions socially, economically, and culturally.